



Mei Ng

“

I don't like a happy Hollywood ending. I'm more interested in that sick world, that twist-ed-up stuff that's underneath family relations.

— Interview in Newsday (1998)

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1967
- * Chinese-American novelist
- * Author of *Eating Chinese Food Naked*

Biography

Mei Ng was born and raised in Queen's Village, New York. She graduated from Columbia University in 1988 with a degree in women's studies. She was also a student at Brooklyn College's graduate program in fiction writing. Temporarily, she worked as counselor for the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. Ng is the third and youngest child of Chinese immigrant parents.

Family and the dynamics of Chinese-American socialization into the US are at the center of Ng's widely reviewed novel *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), her only novel to date. The novel depicts Ruby Lee, a young Chinese American woman who temporarily moves in with her parents in Queens after having graduated from Columbia University. Over the duration of one summer, Ruby makes decisions concerning her career, her relationship to her parents, and her love life. During this time, she negotiates the distanced relationships with her father and her over-protective mother. She also is confronted with problems in her love life and has to decide which direction her four-year relationship with her lover Nick will take. Ruby needs to bring clarity to her sex life with Nick and with other men, and her homoerotic fantasies about women, including her mother.

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Biography continued

The novel depicts Ruby's coming-of-age as she learns to deal with her ethnicity, her poverty, and her sexuality. At the beginning of the novel, she is ambivalent about her identity as a second-generation Chinese-American woman. She is confused about her relationship to her parents whose apartment, behind the family laundry, is full of memories of their loveless marriage and Ruby's difficult time growing up poor, marginalized, and uninspired. Unlike other novels that depict a protagonist's identity formation in relation to his or her placement in Anglo-American culture, Ng's novel focuses on Ruby's identity negotiation in relation to her immediate family. Through Ng's meticulous embedding of details in the interaction between the individual characters into the overall rather silent family life of the Lee family, the novel develops its full complexity. The reader is at once invited to read between the lines (of the few individual dialogic exchanges as well as of the omniscient narration) and to interpret gestures and movements, and thus, to experience first hand the difficulty Ruby has reaching out and connecting to her parents. Ng's talent certainly lies in her ability to communicate to the reader the stifling silence and sense of alienation that overshadows Ruby's family.

In addition to exploring commonplace topics in ethnic American literature such as the protagonist's cultural identity and the generational conflict between immigrant parents and their American-born children, *Eating Chinese Food Naked* deconstructs several persistent stereotypes of the "docile" and "overachieving" Chinese American (Wu). Ng's portrayal of class difference between Ruby and her family and her focus on the financial struggles of the Lee family counters the widely accepted myth of Asian Americans as a 'model minority' whose alleged exceptional financial success on the US job market is often quoted to exemplify the endless possibility for ethnic minorities to live the American Dream of upward mobility. Ruby, her brother Van and her sister Lily, by no means correspond to model students, a stereotype that singles out Asian Americans as the most successful students at Ivy League colleges in the US. Complicated and at times distorted relationships within the family become obvious in Ng's candid depictions of the hardships and internal conflicts of Chinese American families who are often labeled as family and group oriented.



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Biography continued

Characterizing the downhearted realism of the novel, Ng explains: “That’s the kind of aesthetic I relate to. I don’t like a happy Hollywood ending. I’m more interested in that sick world, that twisted-up stuff that’s underneath family relations” (Cryer). Through such realities of complicated family dynamics, Ng depicts the Chinese American family struggling with the same problems as non-Chinese American families. She thus de-essentializes the Chinese-American family and makes it tangible for a broad audience without selling the Chinese-American family as a case study of “oriental” behavior and customs, as does Jade Snow Wong’s autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), for instance (Kim).

The aspect of Ng’s novel that critics have commented on the most is Ruby’s sexuality: her hetero- and homosexual encounters, on the one hand, and her homoerotic feelings for her mother, on the other hand. As Sarah Catlin Barnhart observes, “many readers objected to the cold, demystified nature of Ruby’s sexual encounters.” As far as Ruby’s relationship to her mother is concerned, critics have interpreted the sexual contents of Ruby’s dreams about her mother as anything from “fierce love” (Karpen) to “longing” (Morin). Carole Morin offers the most interesting reading of Ruby’s attempt to take her mother on a trip to Florida. Ruby wants to take her mother on a trip to see her friends, and by so doing, to grant her mother a wish her father has never met. Morin argues that this trip to Florida is a “twisted Freudian honeymoon” that Ruby plans in order to save her mother from her subordinated position in the patriarchal household and from her father’s demands for sex. Ruby never embarks on this trip with her mother, though. At the end of the novel, when Ruby moves into a borough away from her parents’ home, she still toys with the idea of taking her mother away from her father. Instead of openly countering exoticized images of Asian American women, Ng portrays Ruby’s sexual coming-of-age as an issue of female identity rather than as culture-specific treatment of ethnicity (Wong and Santa Ana).

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